

FCCG CHAIR'S REPORT 2009-2010

The opening of Caversham Court in August 2009 after the refurbishment was a triumph, and there can be nothing but praise for the care, high quality and sheer inspiration reflected in the results.

With Reading putting in a bid for city status in 2012, Caversham Court will certainly feature on the list of cultural and environmental highlights that Reading can offer, and we are proud to be involved in the management of the gardens. The Friends are lobbying RBC and councillors to improve the area leading to Caversham Court, to ensure that visitors can access the gardens safely and along a pleasant route. We will be working closely with Reading Civic Society and the Caversham and District Residents Association to bring this about.

Plans for a Management Committee to administer the gardens have not been implemented at the time of writing, but we hope this committee will be set up soon. The Friends of Caversham Court Gardens have been promised two seats on this to ensure that it has a voice in the way that the gardens are managed. We have some concerns that financial constraints will lead to a watering down of the provisions for maintaining the gardens, but we continue to lobby RBC and local councillors to try and prevent this.

The Friends have gone from strength to strength – membership is now nearly 350! – with members coming not just from Caversham and Reading, but from much further afield. Three newsletters have been sent out to keep you informed, and we are very grateful to *Caversham Bridge* for publishing articles about Caversham Court and the Friends' activities so regularly. The Friends have organized tours led by our incomparable Head Gardener, Emily Waters, and we now have a group of volunteer guides who have been trained to take both specialist and general-interest groups round the gardens. We hope to have a regular presence in the gardens during the season to welcome new visitors. Members of the Friends are also volunteering in the gardens working with Emily and her team.

Another success: our website is up and running at www.fccg.org.uk ! This is a really inspiring example of internet-savvy youngsters helping their community. Four Highdown students worked with their ICT teacher to develop our website. Then they trained one of our committee members, Alison Hewitt, to maintain the site. We are tremendously grateful to Highdown School for making this happen.

With even more stunning planting planned for the Long Walk and the vinery bed, the gardens will bring pleasure to all this year. July will see Shakespeare's *Merry Wives of Windsor* staged in the gardens, the return of the St Peter's and St Margaret's fete, and other events. And alongside such cultural sustenance, from April we shall have the Tea Kiosk serving delicious refreshments.

We hope all the Friends will enjoy these activities. If there are Friends who would like to act as volunteer stewards or help with the organization of events in the gardens, that would enhance the role of the local community. These are our gardens, we should make our presence felt.

Thanks to your subscriptions and generous donations, our financial situation is very healthy. Now we need to think what to focus our fund-raising efforts on. A number of suggestions have been put forward: planting a border of nerines for a tremendous splash of colour; Victorian-style lamps to go down the ramp towards the kiosk; and a permanent landing stage. RBC are planning to have only a temporary landing stage for events in the gardens, with the ferry coming over from the Thameside Promenade.

We need your input on this, so please contact us. What should we be doing with the money you have put towards Caversham Court gardens?

The Friends would like to express thanks first of all to Emily, who consistently works above and beyond the call of duty. To RBC's Carolyn Jenkins and to Anne Keenan, who have maintained their deep interest in the gardens and the Friends. And a huge thank-you to the members of the committee and other Friends, who

have worked so hard over the last year on your behalf. We do need more people to help us, so please get in touch.